

John Hamlin.

AN

INAUGURAL DISCOURSE,

PRONOUNCED

ON THE OCCASION OF OPENING THE THEATRE

OF THE

City of London

LITERARY AND SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTION,

IN ALDERSGATE STREET,

ON FRIDAY EVENING, APRIL 24th, 1828,

BY

THOMAS DENMAN, ESQ.

COMMON SERGEANT OF LONDON.

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TO THE
RIGHT HONORABLE THE LORD MAYOR,
Aldermen, and Commons,
OF THE CITY OF LONDON,

THIS DISCOURSE
IS RESPECTFULLY AND GRATEFULLY INSCRIBED.



INAUGURAL DISCOURSE.

THOSE, who three years ago invited public patronage to a Literary and Scientific Institution for the City of London, have now the satisfaction to announce the complete success of their project. That Institution is formed and matured ; it is in the full exercise of its functions. Its library is furnished with some thousands of volumes, for study within its walls, and circulation beyond them ; its members, now exceeding six hundred, resort to spacious rooms, prepared for reading and conversation ; lectures have been delivered on several most interesting subjects, and instruction given in the foreign and antient languages ; and a domicile convenient for these purposes, and, it is hoped, not unworthy of them, is this day thrown open to your inspection.

He who is commissioned to recommend such an Institution to your favor, has almost performed his task, when he has declared these happy results. Your hopes have been realised ; the expected advantages are your own, and will supply the strongest motives for securing and extending them. But as they cannot be exclusively enjoyed, as a wide diffusion of the light of knowledge is essential, not only to its utility, but to its brightness, you will desire to enrol in your Institution all whom local circumstances bring within its range, and will hope for the benefit of co-operation and rivalry from other Institutions, called into existence by the contemplation of your success.

The very least advantage that can arise, is the acquisition, by great numbers, of a taste for English Literature. Let us pause for a moment, to consider the extent and

value of this alone. Ask yourselves, if any prospect of emolument would tempt you to forego it; and in observing others, contrast the man of active habits, who can devote his hours of leisure to this the most limited intellectual gratification, with him who is destitute of such a resource. Most of us have observed, in various departments of life, strong natural talents, acting with marvellous precision in some narrow round of daily employment, but from the want of general cultivation, incompetent to any other effort. How lamentable a waste of time would have been reclaimed in such cases, had all the faculties been taught activity! how many starts of unseemly irritation, how many tedious hours of languor, would have been avoided! How many low thoughted cares of sordid gain, how much degrading sensual indulgence, would have been changed for the purest enjoyments, at once independent and social in their nature, delighting the mind in its intervals of idleness, and bracing it to the more cheerful and effective discharge of duty!

The character here alluded to is fast disappearing from among us, and will shortly exist in tradition only. The same degree of ignorance and intellectual apathy, is from henceforth rendered impossible, by the all-pervading activity of the periodical press. But we are become so familiar with the means by which the mighty machine carries on its civilizing process, as to be in some danger of undervaluing, if not forgetting, the service performed. Even while that great object, the extinction of unlettered barbarism, is in a rapid course of accomplishment, we are often invidiously told of what is of necessity left undone, and reminded of the poet's disparaging sarcasm against "a little learning." Assuredly an ampler supply is much more to be desired: but a beginning must be made, the progress of accumulation is by nature slow and gradual; and the smallest portion of learning is better than none at all, partly for its own intrinsic value, and still more as the indispensable forerunner of further acquisitions.

Those, however, who, despising what is scanty and superficial, thirst for a deeper draught from the Castalian spring, may approach the native wells of English Literature, without any fear of disappointment. It is here that our breasts may be allowed to swell with honest feelings of patriotic pride. England may truly boast, that in her hour of wealth and luxury, she has not left "her debt to

Science, and the Muse unpaid," while she points to the labors of her sons, and the golden harvest gathered in by their Genius and Industry. Casting our eyes round the shelves of the commonest English library, we discover an exhaustless store of treasures above all price : the catalogue of our humblest bookseller is a beadroll of immortal names. Nor do we prefer the claim from blind partiality, since it is admitted by the learned of all nations, who have read and admired, have translated and imitated ; have become scholars in our grammar, to obtain familiarity with our classical productions, and have deemed the award of deathless fame, no more than a just expression of their gratitude.

Two peculiar circumstances occur to my mind, as happy auguries of the enduring and increasing grandeur of English Literature.

The first is our community of language with the United States. Our own colonies, however distant and extensive, seem but to echo back our voice ; but the inheritance of our language by the great North American Commonwealth, an independent, a powerful, and a rival nation ; the attachment to our habits of thinking and speaking, on the part of one of the most civilized countries, if civilization depends on the diffusion of knowledge, and the protection of equal laws ; the identity of education between our sons, and the multiplying millions of those boundless regions : the filial but formidable competition with which the offspring has awakened the admiration, and must stimulate the energies of her parent ;—all these things hold forth the auspicious promise of stability to the Literature common to both countries, as well as of peace, liberty, and happiness, to the Old World and the New.

The other circumstance to which I advert, is the regular succession by which our literature has maintained its state, from an early period quite down to the present time. Its current, even at this point, so remote from its source, has betrayed no symptom of exhaustion, no danger of being swallowed up in the barren sands of the desert. Its unimpaired stream is still wonderful for depth and breadth, for clearness and power. Some flats indeed, some shoals, may be here and there detected, but so rare and partial, as scarcely to arrest our notice, and never to disturb our faith. To prove, by an appeal to living genius, how well

the glory of former ages has been sustained in this, would be a pleasing but an endless task, and might by some be deemed an invidious one. But our sanguine hopes for the future are well justified by the consummation of the past, which shews Burke still in possession of the same commanding eminence attained by Bacon, and can trace the illustrious family of our poets, through an unbroken pedigree, from Byron back to Shakspeare.

At the sound of that great name, I pause but for a moment. Not ambitious to break a lance with the long train of our eminent critics, who have exercised their talents in his praise, I will merely observe, that their eulogies always succeed in raising our estimation of the writers, but have as uniformly failed to do justice to their subject. A few simple facts record the praise of Shakspeare; the insatiable demand for his works—the swarming theatres, which find them ever new and delightful—the pride with which real dramatic genius aims at embodying his conceptions, while it disdains to receive its task from any meaner hand. His powers is manifested in tears and smiles, in agony and rapture, on its first display to the sensibility of youth, in the tranquil delight of reflecting age, on the hundredth repetition: in the permanency imparted to our language by the richness, the strength, the ever varying graces of his style; in the gentle, yet generous spirit, the sympathy with all the kindly affections, the high feelings of magnanimity and honor, by which he has produced a lasting effect on the character of Englishmen.

I seek not “to gild refined gold,” but proceed to connect a very homely fact, yet not, I trust, unseasonable on this occasion, with that name, which is absolutely foreign to no literary discourse. Suffer me then to remind you that the immortal tragedies and comedies of Shakspeare were almost all composed in this Metropolis, without aid from the fastidious apparatus of literary leisure, but under the pressure of straitened means, and amidst all the distractions of an active and unsettled course of living. It was in London also, and when plunged in the engagements and agitations that belong to the office of Chancellor, that Bacon composed his greatest work, the *Novum Organon*: it was in London, busy, clamorous, crowded, commercial London, that Newton found opportunity to explore and lay open the deepest mysteries of nature.

In this city, in this immediate neighbourhood undoubtedly, perhaps on this very spot, Milton, a native of London, was able to produce the sublimest of all human compositions. His careful biographer, Mr. Todd, has so described the situation of his house, as to make it highly probable that we are now assembled on its site. It was then "a handsome garden-house in Aldersgate Street, situated at the end of an entry, that he might avoid the noise and disturbance of the street. Here he received into his house a few pupils, the sons of his most intimate friends, and he proceeded with cheerfulness in the noblest employment of mankind, that of instructing others in knowledge and virtue." With what approbation would his free spirit look down on the work you have achieved! How congenial to his own profound and most liberal views of education, the business which now engages us! how gratifying to have foreknown, that the same scene, in which a few were then urged by him to painful studies in certain branches of learning, would be eagerly resorted to by hundreds, as a theatre for teaching every thing that science and letters can bestow!

These recollections, however interesting, I might have abstained from reviving in your minds, but for the practical inference, which grows out of them. It is not alone by the splendid names of Shakspeare and Milton, of Newton and Bacon, that the argument may be maintained; for almost all the literary trophies that dignify our country, have been earned in London, and a large proportion of them by men engaged in the active concerns of life. If they then, "in populous cities pent," in the thronged abodes of trade, and politics, and pleasure, could give their imagination so wide a range, or task their reason with speculations so abstruse and severe, shall we effeminately decline to reap the fruit of their toils, merely because we live in the place where they were performed, and give some hours of our time to occupations akin to theirs? Shall we not rather exemplify the truth taught by experience, that the necessity of appropriating time, imposed by the exigencies of active life, may be made available for every useful purpose—that some portion of leisure may be carved out of every day, and cannot be so well employed, as in extending our knowledge, and multiplying our attainments?

But the real lover of English Literature will not be slow in discovering that it can only be completely relished by means of a free intercourse with other branches of knowledge. He will perceive that he has insensibly formed an alliance with Classical Antiquity, with Foreign Genius, with every one of the Sciences. Here his growing curiosity will expatiate in a boundless field. Let him fearlessly proceed in its cultivation, according to his means, his opportunities, and the best of his natural endowments. However the bias may be given, it is a fact, that "to different objects, different minds incline:" to some the acquisition of languages appears like an instinct; for others the exact sciences have no mysteries; some again possess a decided facility for exploring and combining the truths of political philosophy. Let each take care to improve his own talent, with the certainty of receiving its reward: but let him beware of any exclusive system of study, and remember, that no exertion of the mind faithfully directed to the attainment of truth was ever yet bestowed in vain!

On the establishment of those exemplary associations, the Institutes for Mechanics and Artisans, one advantage of a nature peculiar to themselves was justly expected to arise. The proposed union of Science and Art seemed to hold forth the promise of improvements the most extensive. By placing the skilful hand under the guidance of an observing eye and a reasoning mind, the daily labours of the working man were converted into a series of experiments, likely to open constantly fresh discoveries, and establish results of high importance. Precisely in the same manner must the diffusion of liberal knowledge among the middling classes promote investigations of still greater consequence; business will be more perfectly executed, because more clearly understood. Thus, while the science of political economy casts a steady light on the thousand paths, through which Commerce pursues its objects, the facts collected practically on the way will at once correct the theory, and point out its most useful application.

Nor will such effects be restricted to those limits, wide and expansive as they are, within which individual interest prompts men to exertion. In a free state, where almost every citizen must in some sort be an active public man, the cause of both will thus be ever gaining ground. The habit of

abstract reasoning will suggest measures of salutary reformation, while hourly experience shews how best they may be called into action. An obvious example occurs in that vast and interesting subject, the management and relief of the poor, imposed on many as a legal duty, and spontaneously assumed by charitable companies. In either case it is much to be feared, that large sacrifices of time and money have been often made to no other end than that of aggravating the evil, and making all remedy hopeless. Munificence has been worse than wasted; it has become a nuisance to the public, and a curse to the sufferers,—and all this, from ignorance of a few obvious principles, which study and reflection could not have failed to render familiar.

To the class to whose advantage your exertions have been devoted, belongs the profession of the Law,—a profession, so much interwoven in all the affairs of men, and on whose integrity such absolute reliance must be placed, that in them the elevation of character produced by literary habits is a positive gain to the public. From the same class also those Juries are drawn, who form the only real safeguard of all our rights. This truth can never be too often repeated. But if Juries are deficient either in intelligence or independence, if their minds are unenlightened or their spirit servile, farewell to the blessings of that boasted ordinance! it will then be, as it has often already been, but an engine for effecting crooked designs, and a cloak for disguising them! Farewell to the hopes of legal and judicial reformation, of short, and cheap, and simple methods of procedure, which it is now apparent can only be expected from the practical good sense of a vigilant, a well informed, and a considerate public.

In still higher regions of political science, in the exalted sphere of Government and Legislation, the action and reaction of theory and practice will strike out still more extensive good. Few members of this Institution probably are without some influence in parliamentary elections, and many may, at some period, be themselves elected: many may be appointed to a share in the executive administration of public affairs. In the exercise of these rights, and the discharge of these duties, what stronger stimulus than the hope of serving our country, by the application of just principles to such important ends? what more encoura-

ging support than a free intercourse with kindred minds, long exercised in similar discussions? what sweeter reward, than the consciousness of struggling—not at all times unsuccessfully—for the great interests of mankind, for the sacred cause of truth and justice, of freedom and humanity?

Would that these weighty considerations had been urged by a more powerful advocate. They are a theme for talents of the highest order, acting freely in perfect leisure, undisturbed and undivided. He who, without any of these, has now rather invited your own reflection to the noblest subject than discoursed upon it, could not, however, decline the task, which a too partial kindness assigned him. This was forbidden, not only by his sympathy with your feelings, but by the sentiments of esteem and confidence which he has long cherished towards his respected friends, the promoters of your Institution, and by his attachment to that illustrious City to which he is proud to belong. For nothing can so effectually contribute to the prosperity and honor of London, as the emulous advancement of her sons in the career of Science and Literature. He trusts that his zeal may in some degree supply what is wanting in ability; and he can offer at least his testimony as a witness speaking from experience and observation to the value of literary pursuits as means of happiness. They are, in truth, in the language of that lesson imbibed in his early years, “the nourishment of youth, the delight of age; the ornament of prosperous life, the refuge and consolation of adversity; the companion of our weary travels, of our rural solitudes, of our sleepless nights.” These words were uttered near two thousand years ago by the great statesman and orator of Rome, who in those characters performed but a fleeting service to his own country; while, as a philosopher and a man of letters, he has conferred benefits on all mankind, which must be felt while the world endures.

The task of recommending your Establishment I now resign to better hands. I place it in your own. May it thrive to the full extent of your honourable wishes!

CITY OF LONDON
LITERARY AND SCIENTIFIC INSTITUTION,
165, ALDERSGATE STREET.

May 6, 1828.

IN offering to the Public the preceding Discourse, which excited so powerful an interest among the crowded audience before whom it was delivered, the Committee think it their duty to subjoin a few facts respecting the nature and progress of the Institution under their management.

The general plan upon which this Institution was framed, and the objects which it was intended to accomplish, are already sufficiently known. The Committee, while they are enabled to state that the principles on which it was originally founded have been strictly followed up, feel themselves fully entitled to add, that its success has exceeded the warmest expectations of its original framers.

1. In spite of the inconveniences inseparable from the necessity of hiring a Lecture Room, a constant series of Lectures has been provided for the members, with only a short interruption during the last month. One Lecture at the least, and very frequently two, have been delivered in every week: and there is scarcely any department, either in Literature or Science, which has not been thus introduced and recommended to them, with all the advantages and attractions of *vivâ voce* illustration. Among the Lecturers with whose services they have been favoured, the Committee might boast of names which are an honour both to this Metropolis and to science in general: but they deem it sufficient to appeal, in proof of the merit of the Lectures, to the lively interest with which they have been received, and the undiminished numbers which they have continued to draw together.

The Building now auspiciously opened will afford to the Members a facility for attending the Lectures, and a convenience for hearing them, not before enjoyed: and the Committee entertain a confident hope that the increased audience which they can now accommodate, together with the dignity which the Institution acquires by possessing a Lecture Room of its own, will attract new Lecturers to their service: thus enabling them to enlarge the future range, and diversify still further the subjects of the Lectures.

2. With respect to the attainment of foreign languages,

a large portion of the members have assiduously profited by the facilities which the Institution affords. Classes have been constantly in progress for the Latin, French, Italian, and Spanish languages, under able and attentive teachers. Other studies less universally attractive, but not less useful, have been prosecuted in the same manner—such as the Art of Shorthand, the Use of the Globes, and the Science of Logic. And whenever any number of members may happen to concur in attachment to any particular science, it is the duty, as well as the pleasure, of the Committee to afford them the amplest facilities for studying it.

A class formed for the discussion of Historical and Philological questions has been found eminently profitable and attractive. Care has been taken to exclude from this class all theological or political questions: but the subjects considered, though usually solid and scientific, have been so handled as constantly to keep alive and captivate the attention of the class. The number of members engaged in it has been unusually great: and the Committee have remarked with pleasure, how much it has instigated the members to seek the requisite previous instruction, by private reading in the Library. Acceptable and interesting as this class has proved, it is still more valuable from the habits which it tends to form among the members, of investigating and explaining the reasons for their opinions, and of hearing and canvassing the arguments urged by opponents.

3. The Library of Reference and Circulation was first formed in April, 1826, and already comprises upwards of 2000 volumes, on History, Biography, Science, and Polite Literature, so as to meet the utmost variety of individual tastes and pursuits. Besides unlimited reference to all the works contained in it, each member is entitled to claim two volumes at a time at his home; and this privilege has been profited by to such an extent, that the present circulation averages more than 100 volumes per day. The Reading Rooms, which are supplied with the Newspapers, the most respectable of the periodicals, and new works of interest, have contributed no less powerfully both to encourage and to gratify studious tastes.

The number of members exceeds now 600: and this ample total, sustained as it has been through a period of commercial distress, is perfectly sufficient to ensure the perpetuity and future importance of the Institution. It need not be stated, however, that the advantages which it holds out will increase with every increase of its numbers,

and that every member who introduces a friend to share in its benefits, adds at the same time to the benefits enjoyed by himself. There is therefore every reason to invite the accession of additional members; and the Committee now do this with the greater confidence, as they feel that they can offer a full and assured equivalent for the subscription required. No means can be found in the metropolis, at once so efficient and economical as this Institution, for gratifying literary tastes, or for multiplying scientific acquisitions.

To all who contemplate the increasing knowledge, and the growing eagerness for improvement, which distinguish the present age, there will appear ample grounds for anticipating the steady advance of every institution destined to promote these grandest of all human objects. The desire for instruction will be more widely diffused as the facilities for procuring it are augmented and brought into notice; each successive acquisition will sharpen the wish for more; and when the pleasure of growing knowledge and superiority has been once tasted,—when the feeling of self-esteem has been associated with intellectual advancement—the student will not only attach himself the more warmly to the Institution which has seconded his progress, but will become assiduous in communicating its benefits to others. The Committee therefore feel authorised in counting upon the interrupted increase of this Institution, as well from the improved tastes of the Metropolis and the exertions of their present members, as from the character of the Institution; the rules of which provide ample securities that the funds of the Subscribers shall be devoted not only to their permanent benefit, but also to their immediate gratification.

To those parents who are introducing their sons into professions, and are seeking to protect them against the multifarious temptations of London, this Institution will be found peculiarly suitable. By entering their sons as members of it, during early youth, and before other habits have been formed, they will materially contribute to form in them salutary and unexpensive tastes; they will secure for them studious and rational acquaintances; and they will teach them to render even their hours of leisure subservient to the acquisition of useful and estimable qualities. A parent who affords to his son the means of joining the Institution at his first entrance into life, while tastes and associates yet remain to be acquired, will take the most effectual means of guarding him against idleness and bad company, and of prolonging those habits of diligent study

which early education so often inculcates in vain. To parents, to masters, and to all who guide the early habits of the London youth, this important consideration is earnestly recommended. They may be well assured that their assistance will only be needed to initiate a youth at first into the benefits of the Institution: that he will quickly be induced to continue his subscription from his own means; and that he will feel himself repaid for the sacrifice of expensive pleasures, as well by the example of his fellow-members, as by his growing sense of the dignity of their mutual object.

The following Gentlemen are the chief Officers of the Institution during the present year.

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